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ABSTRACT

Academic redshirting, the practice of postponing a child's entry into kindergarten, is intended to give a child an extra year to become ready for school, an especially important goal given the increasing academic demands of early elementary years. This digest presents information about the incidence of redshirting, and summarizes some of the findings of studies on the practice. The digest notes that research has yet to provide a clear picture of the short- and long-term effects of redshirting, but some recent evidence suggests a mixture of positive and negative potential effects. Findings are mostly positive for the individual child in the short term, but seem to be increasingly negative in the long term, though none are conclusive. In light of its potential long-term effects, the digest provides 10 suggestions for parents to consider before making the decision to redshirt, including soliciting views from the child's preschool teacher about his or her readiness for kindergarten; finding out more about the nature and structure of the kindergarten class; and asking the kindergarten teacher what can be done at home to help the child reach the same skill level of upcoming classmates. (Contains 11 references.) (OBR)

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Academic Redshirting and Young Children

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The term redshirting originally referred to postponing a college athlete's participation in regular season games for one year to give him an extra year of further growth and practice with the team in the hope of improving the player's skills for future seasons.

Academic redshirting for young children refers to the practice of postponing entrance into kindergarten of age-eligible children in order to allow extra time for socioemotional, intellectual, or physical growth. This kind of redshirting is most often practiced in the case of children whose birthdays are so close to the cut-off dates that they are very likely to be among the youngest in their kindergarten class. This Digest discusses what studies have said thus far about redshirting and its potential effects, and offers suggestions for parents considering delaying their child's entrance into kindergarten.

Incidence of Redshirting

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports that academic redshirting occurs at the rate of about 9% per year among kindergarten-age children (West, Meek, & Hurst, 2000). Redshirting has traditionally been more common in affluent communities and for children attending private schools, although some scholars speculate that there may have been a recent increase in certain public school districts (Brent et al., 1996). According to NCES, boys are more often redshirted than girls, and children born in the latter half of the year are more likely to be redshirted than those born earlier. The NCES report also shows that white, non-Hispanic children are more than twice as likely as black, non-Hispanic children to have entered kindergarten later than their birthdays allowed (West, Meek, & Hurst, 2000).

Redshirting may be a response to demands for a higher level of school readiness (Graue & DiPerna, in press; May et al., 1995). In a national survey, teachers indicated that 48% of their students were not ready for the current kindergarten curriculum (NCEDL, 1998). Alarmingly high percentages of teachers indicated that half of their students lacked important skills, including "following directions" (46%), "academic skills" (36%), and the ability to "work independently" (34%). In light of such data, many scholars suggest that academic curricula are not appropriate for young children (Graue & DiPerna, in press; May et al., 1995; Shepard & Smith, 1988).

Effects of Redshirting

Research on redshirting has so far failed to provide a clear picture of its short- and long-term effects. Some studies have examined the effects of redshirting that occur immediately or within the early elementary years. Others have examined its long-term effects. Proponents and opponents of redshirting often use the same evidence but reach opposite conclusions. It is therefore unclear whether redshirting solves problems of school readiness.

Immediate Effects. Research on academic redshirting suggests that in the short term, redshirting (1) raises the child's academic achievement (math, reading, general knowledge) and conduct on par with or above that of younger classmates (West, Denton, & Germino-Hausken, 2000); (2) increases the child's confidence in social interactions and popularity among classmates (Spitzer et al., 1995); and (3) may simply add to the normal mix of ages and abilities within the classroom. However, there is also some speculation that, in classes where there are children who have been redshirted, some older children may feel alienated from their younger classmates, and some older classmates may have an unfair advantage over younger classmates in size and in psychomotor and social skills. The presence of children of a wider age span may also make the class too diverse for a teacher to manage well.

Effects in Grades 1-3. Researchers have observed other effects of redshirting within the first three years of elementary school, including (1) academic achievement that is nearly equal to that of their grade-level peers (West, Meek, & Hurst, 2000), (2) a lower likelihood of receiving "negative feedback from teachers about their academic performance or conduct in class" (Cromwell, 1998; West, Meek, & Hurst, 2000), and (3) less need for special education than classmates who were retained as kindergartners (Kundert et al., 1995; May et al., 1995). However, there is also evidence that some first-through third-graders who were redshirted as children required greater use of special education services than their non-redshirted and non-retained classmates (Graue & DiPerna, in press; May et al., 1995).

Long-term Effects. Proponents of redshirting often point out that there is no definitive evidence to show that redshirting harms children in the long term. However, Byrd et al. (1997) found that adolescents whose school entry had been delayed exhibited more behavioral problems than their classmates. Moreover, in light of evidence of a higher use of special education by redshirted youths, there is a great deal of speculation that many individuals who were redshirted as kindergartners may have had special needs that were misdiagnosed as immaturity and that should have been treated by some form of direct intervention other than delayed entry (May et al., 1995; Graue & DiPerna, in press).

Suggestions for Parents

Because the research is inconclusive about the effects of redshirting and few school districts prohibit it, parents are usually the ones who have to decide whether to keep their child out of kindergarten for an extra year. The following are

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some points for parents to consider in making a decision:

- Be clear about the specific characteristics of your child that cause you to be unsure about his or her readiness to begin kindergarten with age-mates. In other words, don't delay entrance into kindergarten just because the child is likely to be among the youngest in the class or has a summer birthday.
- Check the school's kindergarten readiness screening procedures or tests to get an idea of how your child might fare in the kindergarten classroom in which she or he will most likely be placed.
- Be assertive about finding out what the school expects of entering kindergartners and the school's suggestions on how you can help your youngster to be prepared.
- Solicit the views of your child's preschool teacher about his or her readiness for kindergarten. Ask, for example, whether your child made some friends in her preschool group. Was he or she usually able to follow directions? Does your child appear to the preschool teacher to be ready to begin academic work?
- Find out more about the nature of the kindergarten program. Is it very formal? Is it organized primarily around formal instruction in basic skills or around more informal "learning centers?" Organizing children's learning around informal learning centers can accommodate a greater developmental range of children than a formal, structured arrangement in which basic skills are taught to the whole group of children in rows of desks.
- Is the class size larger than 25? A very shy child might find a large class more difficult to adjust to than he would a class of around 20 or less. Class size may be a more important consideration for a shy child than even for a child who is not shy but who lacks physical coordination.
- What else would your child be doing if she did not start kindergarten? Would the child have easy and safe access to playmates and play spaces? Are there easily available (and affordable) good preschool programs for your child?
- Ask the future kindergarten teacher for suggestions about what you can do at home to help your child reach the same skill level as future classmates.
- Be careful about conveying your own apprehension about starting school to your child. If you approach the beginning of kindergarten with your child with real confidence and sufficient reassurance, and, if possible, share any concerns with the teacher, your child will adjust rapidly.
- Be careful not to exaggerate to a child how much fun she or he will have in kindergarten. It would probably be best to say something like "You'll make new friends, get to do lots of interesting things, but there will be one or two times when you wish you were at home. But those times will pass. You'll see." This kind of forewarning can often prevent a child from coming unstrung when the inevitable difficult moments do occur.

Conclusion

The most helpful approach for parents may be to obtain suggestions from the school, and ideally from the future teacher as well, about how best to help the child during the first few months of school. The child is likely to adjust to the transition to school when parents are careful about how they express their concerns. Parents can be most helpful by offering the child reassurance and support, and by resisting the temptation to discuss their own anxieties and concerns in front of the child. On the whole, the evidence about the short- and long-term effects of redshirting is inconclusive. The evidence suggests that some benefits of academic redshirting are short lived and may in the long term be disadvantageous (Spitzer et al., 1995; Graue & DiPerna, in press).

For More Information

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